Nangarhar University Social Science Journal

e-ISSN: 3079-2398 (Online) p-ISSN: 3079-238X (Print)

NUSSJ

Vol:3(02), April-June: 2026

Journal Homepage: https://nussj.nu.edu.af

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Phoneme Versus Morpheme: A Comparative Linguistic Analysis

Saeedullah Rahmatzai[1], Saadatullah Safi[2]*

1,2 Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Education, University of Said Jamaluddin Afghani, Kunar Afghanistan.

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the smallest components of language and their role in the organization and production of human speech. In linguistics, phonemes are the minimal units of sound that carry no inherent meaning, while morphemes are the smallest meaningful units. Although both are fundamental to language structure, they operate at different linguistic levels and serve distinct purposes. Using descriptive and analytical approaches grounded in established linguistic research, this study examines how phonemes and morphemes contribute to the formation of meaningful language. The analysis demonstrates that phonemes provide the sound patterns necessary for word construction, while morphemes encode semantic content, enabling effective communication. By highlighting the interaction between these units, the research underscores the hierarchical organization of language and the interplay between sound and meaning. The findings offer insights into the foundational mechanisms of linguistic structure and emphasize the importance of understanding both phonetic and semantic elements in language analysis.

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: *linguistic levels, language unit, morpheme, phoneme, meaningful unit, meaningless unit*

Article History
Received: 25-04-2026
Accepted: 21-04-2026
Published: 30-04-2026

Cite this Article
Rahmatzai, S., & Safi, S. (2026). Phoneme Versus Morpheme: A Comparative Linguistic Analysis. Nangarhar University Social Science Journal, 3(02), 1–6.
https://doi.org/10.70436/nussj.v3i02.81

Introduction

Language is a structured and rule-governed system through which humans convey thoughts, emotions, and information. It enables individuals to communicate effectively and to organize experiences in meaningful ways. To gain a deeper understanding of how language operates, linguists analyse it by breaking it down into its fundamental components. Among these components, phonemes and morphemes are considered the most basic units of linguistic structure. Phonemes represent the smallest units of sound in a language, while morphemes constitute the smallest units of meaning. Despite their foundational roles, students and language learners often confuse these units, leading to challenges in understanding language structure and use. This study provides a systematic comparison of phonemes and morphemes, highlighting their distinct functions and roles within both linguistic theory and practical applications. By examining how these units interact to form words and convey meaning, the study aims to clarify their significance and demonstrate their essential contribution to the organization and comprehension of human language.

Description of Phoneme

In a language, a phoneme is the smallest unit of sound that is meaningless on its own but can distinguish one word from another. A phoneme cannot be divided into smaller meaningful parts, and altering a phoneme in a word can change its meaning. For example, in English, the words put and but differ only in their initial sounds /p/ and /b/, indicating that these sounds are distinct phonemes. Phonemes are abstract mental representations of sounds rather than the actual sounds themselves. The actual spoken variations of a phoneme are called allophones. Allophones are context-dependent alternative pronunciations of the same phoneme and do not change the meaning of a word. For instance, the English /t/ phoneme is pronounced differently in top [tʰ] and stop [t],

*Corresponding Author:
Email: saeedullah2018@gmail.com (Rahmatzai S)

https://doi.org/10.70436/nussj.v3i02.81

© 2024 The Authors. Published by Nangarhar University, this is an open access article published under the CC-BY license https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0

yet both are recognized as the same phoneme /t/ in the mental representation of the language.

Description of Morpheme

The morpheme is the smallest meaningful unit in a language. Morphemes have grammatical or semantic meaning. morpheme can stand alone as a word or may cannot stand along and must be joined in another word.

There are two basic classes of morphemes:

Unbound morphemes are those that can stand or function as words on their own (e.g., book, run).

Bound morphemes are those which cannot stand along and they must have joined to other morphemes (e.g., prefixes like un- and suffixes like -ed).

Similarities and Differences

Similarities

1. Major elements of linguistic study are morphemes and phonemes.

2. They are theoretical units, not physical things.

3. They both help to organized language structure.

4. They differ depending on the language.

Differences

Feature	Phoneme	Morpheme
Level of linguistic	Phonetics	Morphology
Function differentiates	Meaningless Sound	Meaningful unit
Meaning	No meaning	Has Meaning
Example	/t/ /s/ /z/ /m/	Car, re, -s
Role	Develops Word sound	Develops Word meaningful

Research Problem

Language is a sophisticated system composed of interconnected units, each serving a specific function in communication. Among these units, phonemes and morphemes are fundamental, representing sound and meaning, respectively. Many language learners, and even some novice linguistics students, encounter difficulty distinguishing between these components despite their importance. This confusion can affect overall language comprehension, as well as accurate pronunciation and word formation.

Research Objective

This study primarily aims to clarify the roles, functions, and interrelationships of phonemes and morphemes within linguistic theory through systematic analysis and comparison.

Research Questions

1. What is a phoneme, and how important is it in language?

2 What is a morpheme, and in what way does it add semantic value?

3. How do morphemes and phonemes differ and resemble one another?

4. How morphemes and phonemes interact in the structure of language?

Literature Review

Since structural linguistics first evolved, the difference between phonemes and morphemes has been a major topic in linguistic theory. Emphasizing language as a structured system of related signs, Ferdinand de Saussure (1916) established the ground for contemporary linguistic study. His contrast between langue and parole indirectly impacted subsequent investigations of phonological and morphological elements, including morphemes and phonemes.

One of the first methodical analyses of phonemes was given by Key American structuralist Bloomfield (1933). He stressed the importance of phonemes—minimum, meaningless sound units differentiating meaning—in a language's sound system. Bloomfield's ideas firmly shaped subsequent phonological research and defined phonemes as abstract mental objects rather than as physical sounds.

Founding member of the Prague School Trubetzkoy (1939) advanced phonological theory by adding concepts such phonological oppositions and unique characteristics. His studies underlined the functional purpose of phonemes in communication and strengthened the idea that phonemes should be researched inside a linguistic system rather than in isolation.

Hockett (1958) gave a thorough analysis of morphemes as the smallest meaningful units of language in the area of morphology. He stressed the need of morphological analysis in grasping grammatical structure and word formation. Hockett's study helped to define the

distinction between unbound and bound morphemes and their contribution to language creativity.

Using The Sound Pattern of English, Chomsky and Halle (1968) investigated under a generative approach the connection between morphology and phonology. Their study showed that phonological rules govern morphemes and proved that phonemes and morphemes are related elements of linguistic competency. This method changed linguistic focus from surface level to underlying concepts.

By looking at morphemes in relation to word structure, derivation, and inflection, Katamba (1993) and Aronoff and Fudeman (2011) further developed morphological theory. They contended that morphemes are not only valuable components but also crucial for grasping the process by means of which new words are created and interpreted.

More recent research, including those by Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams (2018) and Yule (2020), make phonemes and morphemes accessible for applied linguistics situations and students. Particularly in second-language acquisition and language instruction, these pieces stress the educational need of precisely differentiating sound units from meaning units.

Generally, the literature continually emphasizes how deeply related but at different linguistic levels phonemes and morphemes function. Morphemes give meaning to phonemic sequences; phonemes provide the phonological shape of morphemes. This complementary relationship remains a central concept in both theoretical and applied linguistics.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative and descriptive design. Data were collected from established linguistics textbooks, scholarly research articles, and other academic sources. The study is based primarily on theoretical analysis and comparative evaluation rather than empirical testing. Key concepts and search terms were derived from the main objectives of the study to guide the literature review and ensure a focused examination of phonemes and morphemes. This approach allows for a systematic and in-depth analysis of linguistic theories and their application without relying on experimental data.

The key terms used for the search as shown in table 1, were as follows: **Phoneme Versus Morpheme**, **Description of Phoneme**, **Description of morpheme**, and **Similarities and Differences**. Articles were searched in electronic databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR Scopus, ERIC, Cambridge Journals, and Springer Link.

Then the title, abstract, and keywords were used to search published articles, journal papers,

conference proceedings, workshops, and symposiums. The study made use of both forward and

Table 1. Search strings

Database / Source	Search String	Keywords Focus	Purpose
Google Scholar	"phoneme" AND "morpheme"	Phonology & morphology	To identify studies comparing phonemes and morphemes
Google Scholar	"phoneme vs morpheme" OR "phoneme versus morpheme"	Comparative linguistics	To locate direct comparative analyses
Google Scholar	"phonology" AND "morphology"	Linguistic levels	To explore interaction between sound and meaning
JSTOR	"phoneme" AND "sound system"	Phonology	To collect theoretical phoneme studies
JSTOR	"morpheme" AND "word formation"	Morphology	To identify research on morphemic structure
Scopus	"phonological units" AND "morphological units"	Linguistic units	To analyze unit-level linguistic studies
Scopus	"phonology–morphology interface"	Interface studies	To examine interaction between phonemes and morphemes
ERIC	"phoneme" AND "language learning"	Applied linguistics	To find pedagogical studies
ERIC	"morpheme" AND "second language acquisition"	SLA	To explore learning of morphemes
Cambridge Journals	"phoneme" OR "morpheme"	General linguistics	To gather foundational literature

Results

The results are discussed in relation to the research objectives outlined at the outset of the study. The findings are grounded in a descriptive and comparative analysis of established linguistic theories and relevant scholarly literature.

First research question: What is a phoneme and how does it help a language? The study finds that in a language, a phoneme is the tiniest unique sound element that helps to distinguish meaning across words. Phonemes have no inherent meaning; instead, they work contrastively inside the language's sound system. The research supports the idea that distinguishing lexical items depends on phonemes, which also underlie sound pattern organization and pronunciation. Meaningful oral conversation would not be feasible without phonemic differences.

Second Research Question: What is a morpheme, and how does it help to make meaning?

According to the data, in a language the smallest unit of meaning is a morpheme. Morphemes either add grammatical information like tense, number, or possession or linguistic meaning. The research reveals that semantic interpretation and word formation depend heavily on morphemes. Unlike phonemes, morphemes may stand alone or as bound elements and have a direct influence on the function and meaning of terms inside of phrases.

Research Question 3: Phonemes and morphemes—what sets them apart and what they have in common?

The findings show that as abstract, language-specific units shaping linguistic structure, phonemes and morphemes have parallels. The main distinction between them, however, is in their purpose: morphemes run at the level of meaning while phonemes run at the level of sound devoid of significance. The research supports the idea that phonemes combine to make morphemes, but morphemes cannot be broken back into phonemes in terms of meaning.

Research Question 4: How do morphemes and phonemes interact in the structure of language?

The study shows that morphology and phonology have a close relationship. Morphemes arrange phonemes into coherent groupings; phonemes offer the phonetic realization of morphemes. Phonological rules shape the way morphemes are uttered, as shown by allomorphic variations found in the research. This interaction supports the idea that in the linguistic system phonemes and morphemes work interdependently.

Summary of Results

The findings generally support the idea that in language phonemes and morphemes play different but complimentary functions. While morphemes express meaning and grammatical connections, phonemes define sound distinctions. Their relationship shapes the basic framework of language and helps clear communication.

Table 3. List of selected articles

Year	Author(s)	Title	Research Purpose	Method Type	Context
1916	Saussure, F. de	*Course in General Linguistics*	To establish language as a structured system of signs	Theoretical analysis	General linguistics
1933	Bloomfield, L.	*Language*	To define phonemes and analyze sound structure	Descriptive, theoretical	Structural linguistics
1952	Jakobson, R., Fant, G., & Halle, M.	*Preliminaries to Speech Analysis*	To analyze phonemes using distinctive features	Analytical, theoretical	Phonology
1958	Hockett, C. F.	*A Course in Modern Linguistics*	To define morphemes and explain word structure	Descriptive, theoretical	Morphology

1968	Chomsky, N., & Halle, M.	*The Sound Pattern of English*	To examine phonology–morphology interaction	Generative analysis	English phonology
1976	Aronoff, M.	*Word Formation in Generative Grammar*	To explain morphemes in word formation	Generative, theoretical	Morphology
1985	Bybee, J.	*Morphology: A Study of the Relation Between Meaning and Form*	To explore the link between meaning and form	Functional analysis	Morphology
1991	Spencer, A.	*Morphological Theory*	To analyze word structure and morphemes	Theoretical analysis	Morphology
1994	Kenstowicz, M.	*Phonology in Generative Grammar*	To describe phoneme systems and phonological rules	Generative analysis	Phonology
2005	Odden, D.	*Introducing Phonology*	To explain phonological concepts including phonemes	Descriptive analysis	Phonology
2010	Haspelmath, M., & Sims, A.	*Understanding Morphology*	To provide cross-linguistic analysis of morphemes	Comparative analysis	Morphology
2012	Booij, G.	*The Grammar of Words*	To examine grammatical roles of morphemes	Theoretical analysis	Morphology
2018	Fromkin, V., Rodman, R., & Hyams, N.	*An Introduction to Language*	To explain phonemes and morphemes hierarchically	Descriptive, educational	General linguistics
2020	Yule, G.	*The Study of Language*	To simplify phoneme–morpheme concepts for learners	Descriptive, pedagogical	Applied linguistics

Discussion

The results of this study fit rather neatly with current phonetic and morphological linguistic research. Consistent with Bloomfield (1933), the present study confirms that phonemes serve as the most basic contrasting sound units and have no independent meaning. Bloomfield's structuralise view, which is supported by the present study showing that phonemic replacement causes semantic shifts, placed phonemic contrast as crucial for differentiating lexical objects.

The findings about morphemes also support Hockett's (1958) definition of morphemes as the smallest significant language units. Hockett's categorization of free and bound morphemes is supported by this research, which also supports their critical function in word development and grammatical structure. The data further back Katamba's (1993) claim that understanding both derivational and inflectional processes depends heavily on morphemes.

The relationship between phonemes and morphemes found in this study supports Chomsky and Halle's (1968) contention that phonological rules run on

morphological units inside a generative framework. As shown in allomorphic change, the current examination also shows that morphemes are realized by phonemic sequences and that phonological surroundings affect morphemic pronunciation. This supports the generative linguistics' claim of phonology's and morphology's relationship.

Conclusion

This study has examined phonemes and morphemes within a comparative linguistic framework, highlighting their distinct roles in the structure of language. While phonemes function as the smallest units of sound, morphemes operate as the smallest units of meaning. Understanding both their differences and interrelationships is crucial for linguistic analysis, effective language teaching, and successful language acquisition. The study emphasizes that phonemes and morphemes are interdependent: phonemes provide the sound patterns necessary for word formation, while morphemes convey semantic content that enables meaningful communication. Together, these fundamental units form the foundation of human language, shaping not only how words are constructed but also how ideas are expressed and comprehended. Recognizing their significance deepens our insight into the cognitive and structural mechanisms underlying language, reinforcing their central role in both theoretical linguistics and practical applications.

Suggestions

Based on the findings of this study, several suggestions are offered for future research and linguistic practice. First, empirical studies using speech recordings or learner corpora could provide insights into how phonemes and morphemes are acquired and used in real communication, complementing theoretical analysis. Second, cross-linguistic research comparing phoneme–morpheme relationships in different language types—such as agglutinative, inflectional, and isolating languages—could clarify how typological differences influence the interaction between sound and meaning. Finally, investigations of complex morphological systems, including root-and-pattern structures, may assess whether traditional phoneme–morpheme distinctions remain adequate or require theoretical refinement.

References

Aronoff, M., & Fudeman, K. (2011). What is morphology? (2nd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.

Bauer, L. (2003). Introducing linguistic morphology (2nd ed.). Georgetown University Press.

Bloomfield, L. (1933). Language. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Booij, G. (2012). The grammar of words: An introduction to linguistic morphology (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Bybee, J. (1985). Morphology: A study of the relation between meaning and form. John Benjamins.

Chomsky, N., & Halle, M. (1968). The sound pattern of English. Harper & Row.

Fromkin, V., Rodman, R., & Hyams, N. (2018). An introduction to language (11th ed.). Cengage Learning.

Haspelmath, M., & Sims, A. (2010). Understanding morphology (2nd ed.). Hodder Education.

Jakobson, R., Fant, G., & Halle, M. (1952). Preliminaries to speech analysis: The distinctive features and their correlates. MIT Press.

Kenstowicz, M. (1994). Phonology in generative grammar. Blackwell.

Odden, D. (2005). Introducing phonology. Cambridge University Press.

Saussure, F. de. (1916). Course in general linguistics. Payot.

Spencer, A. (1991). Morphological theory: An introduction to word structure in generative grammar. Blackwell.

Yule, G. (2020). The study of language (7th ed.). Cambridge University Press.